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The Purposes and Ideals of a University

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THE PURPOSES AND IDEALS OF A UNIVERSITY

by

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A discussion of the purposes and ideals of a university may well begin, as did Huxley's rectorial[2] address at Aberdeen, with a statement of the motives that led to the founding of the first great university of Western Europe.[3] That university is now called the University of Paris, and its founder was Charlemagne. In giving instructions to certain ecclesiastic bodies to establish schools he said, "right action is better than knowledge, but in order to do what is right we must know what is right."[4]

The more one ponders over this saying the more he will be convinced that a university can have no higher mission than to insist upon the truth and to discharge the obligation

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1 Robert Stewart Hyer was the first president of Southern Methodist University, and served in that capacity from 1911 through 1920. His article on "The Purposes and Ideals of a University" was published in *The Campus* (SMU Medical Department Annual), vol. 1 (1912-1913), pp. 55-59. There was at that time an SMU Medical Department located in the campus in downtown Dallas prior to the move to the North Dallas location and the building of Dallas Hall. Notations in this edition are by Ted A. Campbell, associate professor of Church History at Perkins School of Theology, SMU.

2 Hyer has "rectoral"; the form "rectorial" has prevailed.

3 The reference is to Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1899), an English biologist who championed the cause of Darwin against conservative critics. Hyer refers specifically to Huxley's 1874 rectorial address to the faculty of the University of Aberdeen on "Universities: Actual and Ideal," which does not actually claim Charlemagne as the founder of the University of Paris, but claims that the university can be traced back to the reforms that Charlemagne instituted: Huxley, *Science and Education* (Collected Essays of Thomas H. Huxley, vol. 3; London: The Macmillan Co., Ltd., and New York: Macmillan Co., 1899), pp. 189-234. Hyer introduces at this point one of two poles of Victorian British university culture that he will try to balance in the article. Huxley represents the pole of contemporary scientific research, represented by Darwin's discoveries. The other pole will be represented (see below) by John Henry Newman and the Oxford or Tractarian movement and involves the recovery of tradition in modern contexts.

4 In Huxley, *Science and Education*, p. 195. The quotation translated here is from an "Epistle on the Cultivation of Literature" (*Epistola de Litteris Colendis*) addressed to the Abbot Baugulfus of Fulda, ca. CE 784-785: *Quamvis enim melius sit bene facere quam nosse, prius tamen est nosse quam facere*. In Jean-Paul Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Latinae Cursus Completus Omnium SS. Patrum, Doctorum Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum* (217 vols.; Turnholti: Typographi Brepols Editores Pontificii, 1844-55) 98:895.

thus expressed. That all knowledge is vain unless it leads to correct living has been insisted upon by so many moralists, has been so sadly illustrated by so many lives, is such a practical everyday fact, that universities are not needed to teach that it is true. But as those with whom universities most directly deal are the very ones who are most likely to forget its stupendous importance, the university is the place where this truth should most be insisted upon.

However, the distinguishing function of a university is not to teach the moral obligation to do right, but to teach what is right. The moral quality of an action is determined by the motive which prompts it. One may commit an act that is fundamentally and radically wrong without violating any moral code. There was a time when it was believed that a sick man could be cured or his suffering greatly alleviated by bleeding him. So long as this belief was accepted by the best medical men it was the duty of the medical instructor not only to inform his students of this fact but it was his duty also to tell them of the moral obligation that would rest upon them when they became practitioners to use their lancets freely for the relief of suffering humanity, a service which is typical of the work that universities are designed to do—to teach what is right, to lead men into the truth that will make them free[5] and save them from inflicting wrong upon themselves and their fellow men.

In ordering the establishment of an institution to learn what is right in all the relations of life, Charlemagne himself may not have realized how right he was; for the founding of the university was but little more than an incident in a long busy life whose chief activities were directed to the establishment of an empire of such strength and stability that it should furnish a throne for his descendants forever. His empire perished with him—his university is immortal. The organization founded in compliance with Charlemagne's command called itself *Universitas Studii Generalis*,[6] which, as Huxley says, means not "Useful Knowledge Society," but a "Knowledge-of-things-in-general Society." This may still be taken as a good general description of what a university should be. When Ezra Cornell expressed his desire to found an institution in which one could "learn something about everything and everything about something" he was but bringing down to date the ancient ideal of Charlemagne.[7] The casual reader who compares the list of subjects taught in that first university with the elaborate and numerous courses of study at Cornell will scarcely see that the two institutions are founded on the same ideal. In the for-

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5 John 8:32. The Vulgate translation of this passage, *veritas liberabit vos*, would become the motto of SMU. Cf. Marshall Terry, *"From High on the Hilltop": Marshall Terry's History of SMU with Various Essays by His Colleagues* (Dallas: DeGolyer Library and Three Forks Press, 2009), p. 10. In this form or with the word order shifted to *veritas vos liberabit,* it is also the motto of Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore) and of Yonsei University in Seoul, Korea.

6 In this as in other cases, Hyer has Latin in quotation marks and not in italics; I have removed quotation marks and placed the Latin in italics to conform to contemporary style.

7 The quotation that Hyer seems to have in mind here from Ezra Cornell was the claim of the latter (1868) that "I would found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study" which still serves as the university's motto (see http://www.cornell.edu, at the bottom of the page). The quotation given in the text is a version of a favorite saying of Thomas H. Huxley (see above), inscribed on a memorial to him in his native village of Ealing (then in Middlesex), and quoted in *Nature* vol. 46 (30 October 1902), p. 658: , "Try to learn something about everything, and everything about something."

mer it was all Latin and Greek; in the latter, it is "little Latin and less Greek" as compared with mathematics, science and a long list of elaborate technical courses. The former, however, was just as "liberal" and just as "practical" for its day and time as is the latter. At that time it was both liberal and practical to study Latin.

In Germany and as far north as Scandinavia, across the channel on the west, and beyond the Pyrenees on the south, men saw that a great light had been kindled in Paris, and thither they came eager for knowledge. But the knowledge that is to be gained from books was accessible only to those who knew Latin. The German, the Scandinavian, the Briton and the Spaniard had no literature of his own to tell him of "the best that had been thought and said." Those who would enter into fellowship with the greatest minds of the past had to learn the language in which they had spoken. Not only those who sought culture, but also those who were looking for a "practical education," had to devote much time to the mastery of Latin; for this was the language not only of the best literary form, but was also the language which set forth the science, mathematics, agriculture and practical arts of that day. If in our day it were necessary to learn Latin in order to learn anything from books it would be regarded as a most serious handicap to all learning. But despite this necessity the University of Paris grew rapidly. Soon it came to regard the whole field of knowledge as its sphere, as is shown by the fact that at an early date it had not only its department of literature and philosophy, but also its schools of law, medicine and theology. At first there was no attempt in these professional schools to create new learning, nor to discover any new truth. These rude men of Western Europe, but recently emerged from barbarism, felt no call to add to the world's stock of knowledge. They entered the storehouse of knowledge as their ancestors had entered Rome, to plunder and enrich themselves. It was not an easy task for them, for this knowledge was buried beneath the dust and ashes which had been produced in the overthrow of Rome. It was wise that at first they confined themselves to the task of recovering the stamped gold of knowledge that had passed current in former civilizations. When that task was completed and all the minted gold had been recovered, a few bold spirits began to explore new regions in search for veins[8] that the ancients had not discovered or had abandoned before they had been worked to any great depth. They were the men who introduced into the universities the modern spirit of investigation and research. This work is now recognized as not only an important but as a necessary function of a university. Institutions that do not devote a large part of their energies and resources to the discovery of new truths are not universities in any proper sense.

An aggregation of professional, technical and industrial schools in which instruction is the only end sought cannot be a university. The nucleus about which a real university is built is that department whose chief aim is culture, and where learning is sought for its own sake, and where men devote their energies to the discovery of truth rather than to the application of knowledge to commercial and industrial affairs. So important and so vital is this nucleus that it alone may make a real university. The research work that is

8 Hyer has “viens” (*sic*).

now being done at Clark is of such dignity and worth that this institution is justly called a university, though it has no professional or technical schools.[9]

In all of the older universities this department, variously called the department of "arts and sciences," the "philosophical" or "academic" department, has always claimed and maintained its supremacy as the center about which all other departments must be grouped. This claim has often been attacked openly and directly, but never successfully. The attack is renewed whenever one of two conditions arises: First, whenever the academic department fails in its mission to inspire its students with a real love for learning and does not implant a desire to extend the bounds of knowledge, and, second, when a great discovery, accompanied by a great intellectual awakening, is made outside of the university.

When a new truth is discovered, some old belief almost necessarily perishes. How far the work of destruction must extend may become a matter of fierce controversy. Those who most realize the importance of the new truth are the ones most apt to underestimate the value of all old related beliefs. It is not surprising that when such discoveries as were made in physical and biological sciences during the latter half of the last century were in progress among the men most prominent in this work there should be round some who, in the joy and pride of discovery, should have so far overestimated their value as to demand that all old beliefs be recast, that the human family have an intellectual house-cleaning to get rid of its worn-out[10] furniture and burn its rubbish. The Tractarian[11] movement[12] was a protest against this tendency. Out of the clamor of this controversy arose two clear sweet notes, "Lead Kindly Light,"[13] and much that is best in "In Memoriam."[14] And the practical result, so far as Oxford is concerned, is that it has become so well equipped to teach the physical and biological resources as to force from so caustic a critic as Huxley expressions, not of satisfaction, but even of admiration.

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9 Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, had been founded in 1887 as the first all-graduate university in the United States. It has a long reputation of faculty members who made substantial contributions to human knowledge. As a physicist, Hyer would have been aware of the work of Clark faculty member Albert Abraham Michelson who in 1887 had collaborated with Edward Williams Morley in measuring the speed of light. Michelson had received the Nobel Prize for this work in 1907.

10 Hyer has “wornout.”

11 Hyer has “tractarian” (*sic*).

12 The Oxford or Tractarian Movement was a movement initiated in Oxford University in the 1830s which reacted against the prevalent Evangelicalism and sought a more catholic vision of Christian faith (and of Anglicanism, in particular) by return to patristic sources. Leaders of the movement included John Keble, Edward Pusey, and John Henry Newman (see below). At this point Hyer introduces the second pole of Victorian british university culture, namely, the reappropriation of tradition as it appeared in the Oxford or Tractarian movement.

13 John Henry Newman's poem (1833) which became a popular hymn across Christian denominational boundaries in the Victorian age.

14 Alfred Tennyson's poem “In Memorian A. H. H.” (published in 1849) commemorating the life of Arthur Henry Hallam. I am not aware of Tennyson's connection to Tractarianism.

The danger which now threatens the highest ideals in American universities is not that the philosophical department is to suffer by reason of the encroachments of science, but that both philosophical and scientific departments are to suffer at the hands of those who clamor for what they call a "practical education." This usually means that universities shall abandon all of their old ideals about culture, the pursuit of knowledge, the discovery of truth, the creation of pure science; that they shall teach only such things as will impart sagacity and foresight to the business and professional man and give skill to the artisan. Universities should (of course) serve practical and definite ends. Men should be made not only better and wiser, but they should become better equipped to minister to their own wants and the wants of their fellowmen. The universities have always done this. The agencies that minister most to the physical wants of men have, as a rule, come from them. The power loom came from Oxford,[15] the steam engine came from Edinburgh,[16] the foundations of electrical science were laid at Bologna and Paris.[17] The telegraph began at Göttingen.[18] The dynamo was built at Paris,[19] the X-ray came from Würzburg,[20] wireless telegraphy began with a mathematical formula at Cambridge[21] and was put into concrete form at Bonn.[22]

Practically all of the great inventions had their beginnings in the universities. Seldom has the university professor so perfected a new device as to make an article of commerce, but he has discovered the fundamental principles which enter into its construction. This great age of applied science must remember that before there can be an applied science there must be a science to apply. Perhaps the state of commercial and industrial affairs is such today that there is great need of men with technical and profes-

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15 The first power loom was designed in 1785 by Edmund Cartwright, a graduate of University College, Oxford.

16 The steam engine was invented by James Watt (1736-1819), who was employed not at Edinburgh but at Glasgow University from 1758, and who developed his engine in a long period leading up to a patent for it by act of Parliament in 1775.

17 Luigi Galvani (1737-1798) of the University of Bologna had discovered biological electricity by observing the reaction of frogs' legs to electrical stimuli. In speaking of Paris, Hyer may have reference to the electrical discoveries of Parisians André-Marie Ampère (1775-1836) or Hippolyte Pixii (1808–1835, see below), though neither was associated with the University of Paris.

18 Hyer has “Gottengen.” Hyer refers here to the work of Carl Friedrich Gauss and Wilhelm Weber of Göttingen University, who built an electromagnetic telegraph in 1833.

19 At this point Hyer apparently regards the “dynamo” or electric generator designed by Pixii (1832; see the previous note) or by Zénobe Gramme (1870s) in Paris as the first true generators, although an earlier version had been constructed in Britain by Michael Farraday in 1831.

20 Hyer has “Wurzburgh.” Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen (1845-1923) of Würzburg University developed the first x-ray device in 1895.

21 The formulae of James Clerk Maxwell (1831-1879) described the properties of electromagnetic fields. Maxwell ended his career as director of the Cavendish Laboratory at Cambridge, although he taught at a number of British institutions, and had developed his formulae (also known as “Maxwell's equations”) earlier.

22 Based on Maxwell's equations, Heinrich Rudolf Hertz (1857-1894) built a device capable of producing electromagnetic waves in 1887. Although Hertz died at Bonn, his discoveries and his device were made while he was on the faculty of the University of Karlsruhe.

sional skill. It may be desirable to have more schools and schools better equipped to turn out such men. It may be that students can very satisfactorily take this training without much previous discipline in the art of acquiring knowledge. But such schools are no part of a university.

A technical school that admits only those who have been well trained in general literary and scientific studies and which graduates them only after they have demonstrated their ability to conduct original investigations may legitimately become a part of a university. Too much energy expended in the production of what is commonly called "practical" will in the end defeat that very purpose. When all of our bright boys are made practical electricians and engineers, who is going to continue the task of discovering the new sciences upon which all our future material progress is going to depend? It is the province of the university of the future to ever enlarge the bounds of knowledge. It can do this only by holding on to its old ideal that all truth is valuable for its own sake, that knowledge is power even when we cannot see how to direct it to our immediate physical wants.

The first duty of the university is to the individual students who come to it for instruction. If it docs not adjust and adapt itself to his personal needs and render him the greatest possible service it renders no service to humanity in general. The university is to be his *alma mater*,[23] and must see to it that he receives such training as best fits him for most complete living. One duty is to see to it that he does not try to walk when he has scarce learned to crawl, that he does not try to run fast till he has learned to walk well, that he shall not be trained to run a street car or act in a circus simply because his immature fancies were directed in these channels. This training which a high school gives, however well it may be done, is not an adequate preparation for a professional course of university rank, where the ideal is that not only must studies be so mastered as to make passing marks on examination, but that intellectual grasp must be so firmly fixed upon essentials that it will not relax when examinations are successfully passed. One important consideration in demanding a high standard for admission to professional courses is that the student just out of the high school is not only not prepared to fully master the studies necessary for the profession of his choice, but he is not prepared to make a wise choice as to his profession. If his natural endowments are such as to make it appear that his choice is a wise one it is equally clear that he has not received the training that is necessary to fit him for those numerous duties that lie outside of professional life, upon the successful discharge of which professional success so largely depends. We are told that in countries where parents arrange between themselves for the marriage of their children at an early age such unions are often very happy ones. A like good fortune has often attended the man who in youth was forced to the choice of a profession. But such cases do not prove that it is well for one to select either his wife or his profession before he has had a chance to look beyond the limited circles of his youth. Principal Caird, of Balliol, has well said, "Education cannot mainly be guided by professional aims, because education is needed to guide in the selection of a profession, to guard against the nar-

23 Hyer has “alma mater,” consistent with his own style.

rowing influence of even the so-called liberal professions, and to fit one for the important social duties that lie outside of every man's professional work."[24]

To fulfill its mission in the future the university must adhere to the ideal which Huxley has so well set forth in these words: "In all ideal universities a man should be able to obtain instruction in all forms of knowledge and discipline in all the methods by which knowledge is obtained. In such an university the force of living example should fire the student with noble ambition to emulate the learning of learned men and to follow in the footsteps of the explorers of new fields of knowledge. And the very air he breathes should be charged with that enthusiasm for truth, that fanaticism of veracity which is a greater possession than much learning, a nobler gift than the power of increasing knowledge; by so much greater and nobler than these as the moral nature of man is greater than the intellectual; for veracity is the heart of morality."[25]

One with an intellect as great as that of Huxley's, but cast in a very different mould, with an even deeper longing to avoid all shams and pitfalls of error, with a faith in a sure revelation from the spirit world to guide all earnest and sincere souls greater than Huxley's faith in the power of the human mind to blaze a safe path for itself—John Henry Newman said: "A university is a place to which a thousand schools make contributions, in which the intellect may safely range and speculate, sure to find its equal in some antagonist activity, and its judge in the tribunal of truth. It is a place where inquiry is pushed forward and discoveries perfected and verified, and rashness rendered innocuous, and error exposed by the collision of mind with mind and knowledge with knowledge. Such is a university in its ideal and purpose."[26]

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24 Hyer has “Baliol” (*sic*). John Caird “On General and Professional Education,” in *University Addresses: Being Addresses on the Subject of Academic Study Delivered to the University of Glasgow* (Glasgow: John McLehose and Sons, 1898) p. 376. Hyer has confused the theologian John Caird, Principal of the University of Glasgow, 1873-1898, with his brother Edward Caird, who was Master of Balliol College, Oxford, 1893-1907.

25 Huxley, *Science and Education*, p. 204.

26 John Henry Newman, “The Rise and Progress of Universities” in *Historical Sketches* (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1872), p. 12. The concluding quotations show a consensus in the basic understanding of a university between Huxley and Newman, whom Hyer has cited as represented two distinct emphases in the culture of Victorian British universities. At the conclusion of his essay, Hyer has a quotation from Methodist Bishop Edwin D. Mouzon, who had served as the first dean of the theological school at SMU: "For the future of Methodism, and in a large measure the future of the Southwest, is bound up with the success or failure of Southern Methodist University.”